

Columbia Defends Its Nazi Links: Everyone Was Doing It

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By: Jewish Press Staff Reporter

NEW YORK — Columbia University is coming under increasing criticism over revelations that it built friendly relations with Nazi Germany in the 1930's. Now Columbia's provost is firing back – but he may have shot himself in the foot.

The controversy began last month when the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies publicized research by one of its scholars, Professor Stephen Norwood of the University of Oklahoma, revealing a series of steps taken by Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler during 1933-1937 to forge ties with the Hitler regime.

After first trying to avoid the issue, Columbia officials are now defending Butler's actions on the grounds that many other prominent individuals behaved similarly.

In 1933, Nazi Germany's ambassador to the United States, Hans Luther, was invited to speak on the Columbia campus.

Butler hosted a reception for the Nazi ambassador, whose remarks were devoted to defending Hitler's "peaceful intentions" toward the rest of Europe. Butler said that as a representative of "the government of a friendly people," Luther was "entitled to be received with the greatest courtesy and respect."

Columbia, like many American universities, continued its program of student exchanges with Germany even after the Nazis came to power.

Norwood points out that a top Nazi official at the time described German exchange students as "political soldiers of the Reich" who were doing Hitler's work abroad. Advertisement

In 1936, President Butler sent a delegate to take part in anniversary celebrations at the Nazi-controlled University of Heidelberg. He did so even though the university had already fired all of its Jewish instructors, implemented a curriculum based on Nazi ideology, and even was host to a mass book-burning.

Butler defended his decision on the grounds that "academic relationships have no political implications." But Columbia students disputing that claim at the time held a mock book-burning on campus and a peaceful rally in front of Butler's residence.

In an episode that seems to have been unique in the history of American academia's responses to Nazism, Columbia expelled a student, Robert Burke, for

leading that rally.

The administration's official charge against Burke was that he "spoke disrespectfully" about President Butler, which at that time was grounds for expulsion. Despite his excellent grades, Burke was never readmitted to the university.

In a series of articles in the Columbia student newspaper, The Spectator, and elsewhere, Wyman Institute director Dr. Rafael Medoff has urged Columbia to apologize for its actions regarding the Nazis, and award an honorary degree to Burke "as an acknowledgment that Columbia was wrong, and that Burke was treated unjustly."

Professor Norwood, who is working on a book about how American universities responded to Hitler, described Columbia's actions in the 1930's as "shameful" and said they "helped legitimize the Nazi regime" in the West. Norwood earned his Ph.D. in history at Columbia.

The controversy at Columbia has attracted additional attention in recent weeks because another major institution, Brown University in Rhode Island, has been facing up to its own skeletons. A Brown University committee recently completed a three-year study of Brown's links to slave-holders. The committee urged the university to make amends by building a memorial to the slaves, establishing a center for the study of slavery, and recruiting more black students.

"We cannot change the past, but an institution can hold itself accountable for the past, accepting its burdens and responsibilities along with its benefits and privileges," Brown University president Ruth Simmons said. The Wyman Institute is urging Columbia "to follow Brown's example and face its own troubling past."

Columbia at first tried to duck the controversy. A Columbia spokesman told the New York Post last month that "the university was aware of the accusations, but the administration hasn't decided whether it will investigate them."

But in recent weeks, the controversy has snowballed, including a feature story in the online journal "Inside Higher Ed," a widely respected voice in the academic community.

Columbia provost Alan Brinkley has now responded, telling Inside Higher Ed, "If the events that Professor Norwood describes are examples of 'collaboration,' then the collaborators include many thousands of leaders and citizens of the United States, Britain, and many other nations."

"That kind of everyone-was-doing-it attitude is appalling," said Medoff. "Is that the kind of message that one of the most prominent universities in America wants to send to its students - that if many people are doing something, it can't be so

bad...?"

An associate dean at Columbia, Professor Michael Rosenthal, has also jumped into the fray. But his defense of Columbia and Butler is raising some eyebrows. Rosenthal is the author of a recent biography of President Butler, called "Nicholas Miraculous."

In an interview with a Columbia students' website earlier this year, Rosenthal said that Butler "was in the forefront" of limiting the admission of Jews to Columbia, "but he was doing nothing that the other schools didn't do." Rosenthal said Butler "was anti-Semitic, but not in a rabid way." Rosenthal also said that Butler "supported Italian fascism" in the 1930's, but it was "a time when many people did ... the notion that he was a Fascist is absurd."

Regarding the current controversy over Butler and the Nazis, Rosenthal told Inside Higher Ed that Robert Burke was "expelled not for the anti-Nazi substance of his protest, but for the fact of the disturbance." He said "Butler was not necessarily one of those who appreciated students' expressions of views. Butler was an autocratic guy."

"More circling of the wagons," Medoff says. "Instead of just coming clean and admitting that Columbia was wrong to expel Burke, Professor Rosenthal offers what sounds like an attempt to rationalize the expulsion. I understand that this is embarrassing for Columbia, but after seventy years, one would have expected a more mature response."

"One of the reasons for writing the book is to develop more public awareness in these institutions, to get universities to address their pasts," Norwood told Inside Higher Ed.

"I think that universities should look at their pasts and examine them carefully and take steps when they can to acknowledge past injustices, and not give such priority to protecting their own reputations."

The Wyman Institute has initiated several successful efforts to persuade prominent institutions to acknowledge mistakes they made during the Hitler era.

Earlier this year, another Wyman-affiliated scholar, Professor Laurel Leff of Northeastern University, completed a study which found that America's top journalism schools and newspaper publishers refused to assist German Jewish refugee journalists who were trying to come to America to escape Hitler in the 1930's.

The Wyman Institute organized a petition signed by more than 80 prominent journalist, editors, and journalism school faculty members urging the Newspaper Association of America to express remorse for those actions.

The NAA issued a public apology, published Leff's findings in its journal, and invited her to address its board of directors.

In 2003, a leading British publisher, IPC Media, became embroiled in controversy when it tried to restrict public access to a pro-Hitler article that had appeared in one of its magazines, Homes & Gardens, in 1938.

After the Wyman Institute organized a petition by 75 Holocaust scholars from around the world, IPC Media publicly apologized, made the article accessible to the public, and even assigned its researchers to investigate whether its magazines had published any other articles sympathetic to Hitler. They found one: a 1936 article in Country Life magazine glorifying Hitler's summer home.

In 2004, Norwood was the keynote speaker at a Wyman Institute conference at Boston University, where he unveiled research concerning Harvard's relations with the Nazis. He revealed that Harvard president James Conant gave a friendly reception to Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstangl, Hitler's foreign press chief, when Hanfstangl visited the campus to attend his 25th class reunion in 1934. The Harvard student newspaper, The Harvard Crimson, urged that Hanfstangl be awarded an honorary degree.

The current managing editor of the Harvard Crimson, Elisabeth Theodore, spoke at the Wyman Institute's conference and acknowledged that the Crimson's articles about Hanfstangl were "regrettable and abhorrent."

Harvard also hosted visits by Nazi ambassador Hans Luther in 1934 and the Nazi consul-general in Boston, Baron Kurt Von Toppelskirch, in 1935; sent a delegate to the 1936 Heidelberg event, and built relations with another Nazi-controlled university, Gottingen.

The current Harvard administration declined the Wyman Institute's invitation to send a representative to the conference to respond to Norwood's findings.

(With reporting by Jason Maoz, Yaakov Kenner and Elliot Resnick)

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